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Veterans of only National Guard division to land on D-Day return for 65th anniversary of invasion

NORMANDY, France -- Thirteen D-Day veterans from the 29th Infantry Division came here to take part in June 6 events marking the 65th anniversary of the Normandy invasion.

Accompanied by family members, the veterans arrived June 1 as honored guests for a weeklong D-Day commemoration at the sites of some of the most memorable battles in military history.

Many of the veterans stormed the beaches here when they were 18 and 19 years old, and now, with incredible stories from D-Day and the aftermath that shaped their lives, they move about with the help of wheelchairs and canes.

The 29th Infantry Division, comprised of units from Maryland, Virginia and Washington, D.C., was the only National Guard division to land on D-Day.



MASS COMMUNICATIONS SPECIALIST 2 CHRIS HENRY Steven Melnikoff, a veteran of the 29th Infantry Division's 175th Infantry Regiment shakes hands with a trio of today's Soldiers of the 175th -- medic Staff Sgt. Steffanie Pyle and infantrymen Spc. Douglas Diaz (right) and Spc. Donald Neuer. Melnikoff, who landed on Omaha Beach on June 7, 1944 and fought in the Battle of St. Lo, was one of 13 veterans of the only National Guard division to go ashore on D-Day to take part in events marking the invasion's 65th anniversary this year.

Donald "Duckie" Robertson was an 18-year-old sergeant with the 29th at the time of the invasion. He said he shares his memories of Omaha Beach more than other veterans.

"Some veterans don't like to talk about their experiences from D-Day, but I can't stop talking about them. They are still so much a part of me, and I have to keep telling the stories," he said.

Some of those stories recount the 29th's landing on Omaha Beach and the weeks after, when Robertson and his men were responsible for burying the bodies of their comrades.

"There were so many bodies we had to carry the bodies on our shoulders, and then use a bulldozer to move them," said Robertson. "Once we got the bodies to the cemetery we handed them over to burial registration," he said.

The dead were then buried in separate graves side by side, Robertson said. On June 8, 1944, amid all the battles, a temporary cemetery was established -- the first American cemetery on European soil in World War II. The present-day cemetery is just east of the original site, at the Normandy American Cemetery and Memorial in Colleville-sur-Mer, just above Omaha Beach.

“The cemetery was originally moved because as Soldiers and reinforcements arrived on Omaha Beach the cemetery was the first thing they saw,” said Robertson.

Harold Baumgarten of the 29th Infantry Division’s 116th Infantry has plenty to share as well. A 19-year-old rifleman in June 1944, the Bronx, N.Y., native was wounded three different times on D-Day, shot in the face twice, and then wounded two more times the following day. Baumgarten’s unit had 85 percent casualties within 20 minutes of landing on Omaha Beach. He was one of only two Soldiers that survived from the landing craft that brought him ashore.

Baumgarten, now 84, limps because of a mine injury to his left foot, yet his mind is sharp. After the war he became a physician and wrote three books about his experience on D-Day.

This year Baumgarten participated in a ceremony to rededicate a National Guard monument near Omaha Beach and marked two anniversaries here – D-Day’s 65th, and 60 years of marriage to his wife, Rita, who travelled to Normandy with him.

Like Robertson and Baumgarten, Steven Melkinoff still remembers combat in Normandy.

Melkinoff and his fellow members of the 29th’s 175th Infantry Regiment landed on Omaha Beach on “D+1” -- June 7, 1944. Eleven days later the regiment took a stand on Hill 108 during the Battle of St. Lo. Those who fought there refer to the place as “Purple Heart Hill.”

“There were 600 casualties in the battle for Purple Heart Hill. Three hundred of those were in the 29th Infantry Division, and 168 Soldiers from my (regiment) were killed,” said Melkinoff.

A monument honoring the Soldiers of the 175th was dedicated June 8 at Villiers-Fossard, where allied troops fought a three-day battle for the town.

The Army awarded the regiment’s 1st Battalion a Presidential Unit Citation for that action, one of only five earned by 29th Infantry Division units during World War II.

In addition to Robertson, Baumgarten and Melnikoff, 29th Infantry veterans Lester Lease, Arden Earll, Robert Lowry, William Doyle, Samuel Krauss, Marrior Gray, James Lockhart, Leslie Dobinson, John Barnes and Sam Dixon participated in this year’s commemoration.

(This article was compiled from reports by Capt. Lindsay Rowland and Mass Communications Specialist 2nd Class (AW) Chris Henry)



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